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Cultural Encounter, Resilience, and Hybridity in the Atlantic World

(O Povo Iorubá no Brasil, Os Brasileiros na Yorubalândia)

Edited by
Niyi Afolabi & Toyin Falola

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To my dad, John Okanlawon Afolabi, who told me stories about the Aguda as a child even though I did not understand him at the time.

—Niyi Afolabi

To all the Afro-Brazilian social and religious movements who struggled to keep Yoruba traditions alive in Brazil despite persecutions.

—Toyin Falola
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Series Editor’s Preface

The Carolina Academic Press African World Series, inaugurated in 2010, offers significant new works in the field of African and Black World studies. The series provides scholarly and educational texts that can serve both as reference works and as readers in college classes.

Studies in the series are anchored in the existing humanistic and the social scientific traditions. Their goal, however, is the identification and elaboration of the strategic place of Africa and its Diaspora in a shifting global world. More specifically, the studies will address gaps and larger needs in the developing scholarship on Africa and the Black World.

The series intends to fill gaps in areas such as African politics, history, law, religion, culture, sociology, literature, philosophy, visual arts, art history, geography, language, health, and social welfare. Given the complex nature of Africa and its Diaspora, and the constantly shifting perspectives prompted by globalization, the series also meets a vital need for scholarship connecting knowledge with events and practices. Reflecting the fact that life in Africa continues to change, especially in the political arena, the series explores issues emanating from racial and ethnic identities, particularly those connected with the ongoing mobilization of ethnic minorities for inclusion and representation.

Toyin Falola
University of Texas at Austin
Preface and Acknowledgments

The Yoruba in Brazil have many accomplishments to celebrate and retain, aspects of which are analyzed in this book. Language, religion, spirituality, and expressive cultures are only some of the enduring elements. They function to preserve customs and traditions that the enslaved took with them during the traumatic Atlantic passage, but also serve as instruments of survival, resilience, hybridity, and memorialization. Although this book focuses on contemporary manifestations of the Yoruba in Brazil and their Brazilian counterparts who returned to Africa in the nineteenth century, other areas of scholarly interests worthy of investigation remain quite numerous and barely broached to date.

Two historical incidents have conspired to make this book project a reality. One is the sheer friendship that both co-editors have cultivated with the Afro-Brazilian diaspora for many years—to the extent that both sacrifice their time (in person or from a distance) to contribute to that South American nation even when the primary purpose is academic research and intellectual dialogue. Professor Falola has indeed taught courses in African History and the African Diaspora at the undergraduate and graduate level in Brazil, while Professor Afolabi has given lectures on African Brazilians and their Yoruba connections in Brazil, in addition to teaching Yoruba to Afro-Brazilian cultural and educational communities. These shared fraternizations and kinships are as historical in nature as they are contemporary; and if properly cultivated, may not only yield further improved relations between Brazilians and the Yoruba but also serve as a strategic incentive for more programmatic institutional building between the two communities that are bound by cultural heritage even though separated by the Atlantic.

The University of Texas at Austin currently has two annual Study Abroad programs with Brazilian institutions, in Rio de Janeiro and Bahia. It is conceivable that these programs will extend to other parts of Brazil in the future such as potential collaborations with the University of São Paulo and the Federal University of Minas Gerais. The Obafemi Awolowo University (OAU) in Ile-Ife, Osun State, Nigeria, also has an institutional agreement with the Federal University of Bahia in Salvador, where Nigerians in foreign-language programs at OAU study for their immersion program in Portuguese in Salvador, Bahia. These young students often get the opportunity to teach Yoruba to Brazilians even as the students in turn improve their Brazilian Por-
tuguese through cultural ties and soulful interactions. It is conceivable in the future that a collaboration such as this book may go beyond scholarly production and lead to further strategic partnerships in terms of exchange of visiting professors for a month or even a semester through such funding outlets as CAPES, CNPQ, Ford, Mellon, and others.

In an era in which rational people are making every concerted effort to make sense of their relevance amidst chaotic realities and persistent uncertainties, to the extent that the concept of a “world order” that was quite common during the Cold War era until the 1980s, seems to have lost its meaning, one cannot but become wary at the thought that the next manifestation of world order may actually be spiritual. Whatever newly found “global” world we might have or desire is faced by another challenge hitherto neglected in world affairs: terrorism in confusing grades and guises. Instead of embracing faith and devotion as sources of celebration, veneration, joy, pleasure, and invocation of higher forces who are often invisible in their spiritual significance to the Earth and community they protect and harmonize, the world is now dealing with a category of religious fanaticism so daring that it makes the world cringe on a daily basis, especially at the sight of many atrocities committed in the name of an invisible Supreme Being.

Needless to invoke the destructive forces of terrorism that go against the very essence of rationality, humanity, and harmony with cosmic forces. In an ideal situation, these cosmic forces have the mission to provide balance and to restore and sustain the natural order of things. Yet the living Yoruba in their mythological, cosmological, spiritual, and epistemological essences, must continue to seek relevance and harmony as they navigate their belief in the ultimate good in every human being. It is against this background that this edited work seeks to appreciate and approximate the different locations, spaces, and transformations that the Yoruba and their dispersed cultures have traversed, whether by accidents of history such as slavery, or by the very act of resistance and hybridity in order to survive the atrocities of dislocation. It takes only one visit to Brazil to see that the Yoruba are adaptive and resilient people. From religion, to culinary skills, music, and expressive arts in general, the northeastern part of Brazil is quite rich in the manifestations of the Yoruba’s power of hybridizations and negotiations across the Yoruba diaspora.

The thematic concerns of this volume, though focused on the four main areas of “Mapping the Yoruba Atlantic,” “Returnees and Resettlements,” “Sacred and Spatial Circularities,” and “Transatlantic Cultural Connections,” have only scratched the surface. Brazilian-African-American relations remain a gold mine for comparative studies, especially in the areas of performance, music, architecture, spiritualities, slavery, health, sports, medicine, sociology, anthropology, alternative energies, environmental issues, and heritage tourism, among others. The focus here is on the duality of the experience of slavery and its aftermath. More specifically, instead of studies focused on unilateral diaspora of Africans in the Americas, and the implicit limitation of such a perspective in the holistic understanding of the African experience in the Americas, this volume challenges scholars to make more painstaking efforts not only to be comparative for the sake of comparison, but to be truly transatlantic by also examining the aftermath of slavery and the often neglected historiography of a compelling group
in transatlantic slavery who chose to return to Africa after abolition of slavery, such as the Agudá (the Yoruba [Catholic] returnees from Brazil), along the western coast of Africa.

A fundamental issue for Brazilian(ist) scholars is the question of religious syncretism which reverberates throughout Brazilian culture. It is a contested terrain of analysis. One school of thought suggests that there is nothing like syncretism between the African and European religious values but more of co-existence. Another claims that religious syncretism was more of a strategy that has actually permitted the survival of African religious and cultural value systems in Brazil. Yet this controversy is not limited to the religious terrain alone. On the spectrum of the Brazilian returnees to Yorubaland, there is the issue of authenticity and superiority-inferiority complexes: even as the indigenes feel a sense of arrogant oppression as exercised by the Brazilians returnees, the returnees also feel a sense of hostility by the indigenes, and this creates an atmosphere of confusion and alienation that Maya Angelou best describes in one of her autobiographies, All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes, where she documents her own experience of having her “Africanness” questioned in Ghana despite her genuine efforts to sacrifice, contribute, and embrace those she hoped to see as her ancestors and fraternals, only to be disappointed and hurt by those who chose to see her more as an “American” and not an “African.” Yet beyond these human and even scholarly controversies which are compelling of further research, there is a goldmine of cultural affinities between Africans and their diaspora begging for scholarly investigations not only in Brazil and Africa but in the rest of the African diaspora in Cuba, Trinidad, Haiti, the Bahamas, the US (Miami, New York, Louisiana, etc.), among other locations.

One of the reasons why Afro-Brazilian syncretism has enriched many transatlantic studies lies exactly in the interactions between Catholicism and African traditional religions. Though there is a huge discussion about religious intolerance on the part of more recently emerged Brazilian Pentecostals who demonize African-derived religions in Brazil and go to the extent of destroying, vilifying, and persecuting the devotees of Candomblé or Umbanda temples—the same way the state (as represented by the instrument of violence that the police represented pre- and post-abolition) persecuted the worshippers even after abolition of slavery and in the face of the fact that Brazil officially claims freedom of religion, though officially a Catholic state. In the African-American context, and unlike the Afro-Brazilian context where there is at least the sense of syncretism, that is, a structural correspondence between two models, even when one is seen as dominant and the other secondary, the dynamics of syncretism are resisted by the very power of Evangelicals who insist that there cannot be any form of association between “pagan” or “satanic” worship and the Christian faith. Thus, this inimical even “puritan” attitude made the notion of continuity of African religious values in the United States quite problematic. However, it is hopeful, though not to the extent of what obtains in Brazil, that the Santería and Orisa worshippers in the US would continue to make some steady progress—so that what is considered “satanic” may well inform those from other religious traditions that religious cosmologies are only media to attain perfection and purification that are part of the life-journey that is embodied in our goals, destinies, and aspirations, even when we may not
be aware of it. The cycle of life, even as a natural phenomenon, is indeed inescapable for every human being.

We would like to thank all the contributors for their academic pieces as well as the Carolina Academic Press (CAP) for believing in this unique bilingual book from the very outset. Professor Falola thanks all his associates and friends in Brazil. Professor Afolabi thanks the Warfield Center for African and African American Studies for the research funds that enabled him to travel to Brazil as well as expend financial resources on these timely projects. We also thank the numerous anonymous readers as well as the copyeditors, namely Dr. Arlen Nydam and Dr. Felipe Fanuel Xavier Rodrigues, as well as the entire editorial staff of CAP for their production support, effectiveness, and professional rigor. We thank the University of Rochester Press for the permission to reprint Chapter 2, “Mapping and Conceptualizing the Yoruba Atlantic,” and an abridged version of Chapter 5, “Atlantic Yoruba and the Expanding Frontiers of Yoruba Culture and Politics,” previously published in Toyin Falola’s *The African Diaspora: Slavery, Modernity, and Globalization* (New York: University of Rochester Press, 2013 [118–162]). Finally, we thank our families for allowing us focused time away from them in order to complete this volume.

*Niyi Afolabi and Toyin Falola*

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